

1955

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The Hail Mary

JAMES G. SHAW

Number 40

ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

Born in England, James G. Shaw came as a student to Montreal in 1929 and has been a Canadian ever since. After his graduation from Loyola College he taught English at various colleges and wrote for many publications. On the feast of the Assumption, 1948, in his capacity of feature editor for the British United Press, Mr. Shaw was witness to a miraculous healing at the famous shrine of Our Lady of the Cape in the province of Quebec. Two years later he became editor of the *Annals of Our Lady of the Cape*. He now devotes his time to free-lance writing and in 1954 published two books, *Our Lady of the Cape*, and *The Story of the Rosary* (Bruce) from which this selection is taken.

(published with ecclesiastical approval)

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THE HAIL MARY

JAMES G. SHAW

THE OUR FATHER IS ONE PRAYER WHOSE ORIGIN does not need discussing. It came straight from the lips of Christ Himself. But the Hail Mary is different. If the Our Father was born of God coming to the people, the Hail Mary came into existence through the people going to God by borrowing the prayers of the Church to honor His mother.

In its earlier form, and for a long period, the Hail Mary consisted entirely of the salutation of Gabriel plus what St. Peter Damian called the "evangelical" salutation of St. Elizabeth.

These two scriptural quotations just cry out to be joined together. In them heaven and earth join to salute the most honored of creatures. And Gabriel, representing the court of heaven, ends his salutation, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women" (Lk. 1:28), in the same words with which Elizabeth, representing the human race, begins hers, "Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb" (Lk. 1:42).*

The two scriptural greetings are first found joined in the Offertory of the Mass for the fourth Sunday of Advent, which has been a Marian Mass since the year 600. The salutation of Mary is used in some form in several rituals of that period or earlier. But there is no sign of its having been used in these centuries as a separate prayer of its own.

However, despite the fact -- or lack of fact -- the pious literature of the Middle Ages has provided us with a legend which, like that of St. Dominic and the rosary, involves an apparition of Our Lady and credits the origin of the Hail Mary as a prayer in its own right to one of Mary's servants. If some people still believe this story, it is probably because historians habitually repeat it and then, in the annoying way they have, tell us it isn't true. People remember and promptly forget the scholarly note.

*In the angel's salutation we use the usual words, "the Lord is with thee." But the common English wording of the Hail Mary at the beginning of the nineteenth century was "our Lord is with thee." Cardinal Wiseman, in one of his *ESSAYS ON VARIOUS SUBJECTS*, came out against this our new-fangled version in much the same tone as Alanus de Rupe protested against using such a name as *ROSARY*. The cardinal called the change, "stiff, cantish and destructive of the unction which the prayer breathes."

THE HAIL MARY

In this instance, the legend concerns St. Ildephonsus, archbishop of Toledo, who died in 667. He was a most devout and learned man who wrote much about the Blessed Virgin. Some of the legends that sprang up about him after his death were no doubt intended to typify this Marian zeal. The one which the medieval age of Mary seized upon most avidly tells of St. Ildephonsus going into his cathedral one evening and finding Our Lady sitting on his own episcopal throne with a choir of angels around her singing her praises. As the saint approached, he fashioned his own praises to join in the angelic chorus: "making a series of genuflections and repeating at each of them those words of the angel's greeting: 'Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.' " To show her pleasure at this homage, Our Lady presented the bishop with a beautiful chasuble.

This legend, recounted by Mabillon in his ACTA of the saints of the Benedictine Order, gives us the two salutations joined to form the Hail Mary as it existed down to modern times. Unfortunately, as Father Thurston tells us, the story "in this explicit form cannot be traced further back than Hermann of Laon at the beginning of the twelfth century."

IT DOES NOT SEEM POSSIBLE TO DETERMINE exactly when the Hail Mary became a separate prayer. But it most probably became familiar to the people through the "Little Office" of the Blessed Virgin which was one of the popular Marian devotions of the Middle Ages. Most of these Offices (there were many of them) made frequent enough use of the separate salutations to make them familiar phrases. And the Saturday Office in honor of Our Lady, which has come down to us unchanged, uses the angel's salutation as a solemn opening and has Elizabeth's words as the antiphon for Vespers and Lauds.

Although there is no evidence that these Little Offices joined the two phrases, it is clear that their use together as a separate prayer followed shortly. We have mention of it in a legend contained in the works of St. Peter Damian who died in 1072. It tells of a cleric who had fallen away from his vocation but had preserved the habit of reciting each day before a statue of Our Lady the following words: "Hail, Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb." His bad con-

THE HAIL MARY

duct had lost him his benefice and left him, therefore, with no means of livelihood. In return for his prayer to her Our Lady appeared to his bishop and obtained the restitution of his benefice so that the man would have enough to live on.

In the process of putting a moral to this tale, St. Peter Damian shows that he thinks of the prayer as two little excerpts from the whole Office which the man should really have been saying. The point he makes is that if this man received the nourishment of his body for reciting these two short verses, those who daily recite to Our Lady the full prayer of all the Hours should certainly be most confident that they will receive the supernatural food of eternal life.

After this, as we know from many legends such as those quoted in **The Story of the Rosary**, the angelical salutation became quite a common prayer, though we cannot be certain to what extent the **Aves** consisted of both salutations. We do find dated evidence of the change from one salutation to a combination of both in at least one place. Before 1184, the Cistercian Abbot Baldwin, later made bishop of Canterbury, wrote: "To this salutation of the Angel, by which we daily greet the most Blessed Virgin, with such devotion as we may, we are accustomed to add the words, 'and blessed is the fruit of thy womb,' by which clause Elizabeth at a later time, on hearing the Virgin's salutation to her, caught up and completed, as it were the angel's words, saying; 'Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.' "

UP TO THIS TIME, THERE IS NO MENTION in any of the diocesan regulations of the Hail Mary as an official prayer. Now we begin to find it listed along with the Creed and the Our Father. The first such mention occurs in a synodal decree of the Bishop of Paris in 1198. This was followed by similar decrees, the next of which Canon William lists as Durham (1217), Treves (1227), Coventry (1237), Le Mans (1247), Valence (1255), Norwich (1257).

Although such decrees are proof of the rapid spread of the Hail Mary in France and England, the prayer apparently did not attain the same status as some other countries until a century or more had passed. A German preacher, who died in 1272, in telling his listeners that parents should teach the Creed and the Our Father to their children, added the words: "If they could add to that the Hail Mary, it would be a wonderful thing."

THE HAIL MARY

In passing, it might be well to note the coincidence between the dates of these first decrees and the life span of St. Dominic. Recent historians of the rosary, like Father Thurston and Canon Willam, have been so concerned with proving that St. Dominic did **not** found the rosary that they are little inclined to dwell upon signs that he did have something to do with it. The dates themselves do not prove anything. In fact it may be argued that neither St. Dominic nor any of his sons had any influence on those dioceses before the dates given. But the fact remains that so far as mention in official church records is concerned, the Hail Mary before the time of St. Dominic was nowhere, and after him it started to be everywhere. This, despite the lack of a single written word to say that St. Dominic ever mentioned the Hail Mary to anyone, is at least a strong suggestion that the tradition which has the saint preaching the Hail Mary incessantly may not be without foundation. It is historical fact, whether one call it coincidence or not, that the Hail Mary and the Dominican Order officially appeared in the Church and began to spread through it in the same period of time.

AS A MATTER OF FACT NO HISTORIAN, NO MATTER how definite he becomes in separating the founder personally from the devotion, has ever suggested that the Dominican Order was not a principal proponent both of the Hail Mary and of the modern rosary. We have already seen examples of Dominican and Dominican-directed recitation of the Hail Mary. Now, with the issuing of directives that the faithful be instructed on the **Ave Maria**, we find Dominicans in the lead with treatises and sermons on the prayer. Such great names among them as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas took the short Hail Mary as sermon themes.

Thus far the prayer is made up only of the two salutations. The next changes that took place were the addition of the words **Jesus (or Jesus Christ)** and **Amen**.

There is again no exact knowledge of when or how these additions were brought in to round out the short form of the prayer. A prayer book published in 1474 recognizes the additions as standard and present the Hail Mary as consisting of four parts and says that the first was composed by the angel Gabriel, the second by St. Elizabeth, the third, consisting of the Holy Name, **Jesus Christ**, by the popes and the last, the word **Amen**, by the Church.

THE HAIL MARY

The basis for the statement about the third part is a common medieval tradition that the Holy Name was added on the initiative of Pope Urban IV in 1261.

This gives us the complete text of the Hail Mary as it appeared in prayer books and catechisms of the succeeding centuries and as it was used down to the year 1568: Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Amen.

This short form remained in use long after the longer form became official. Father Thurston reports that about the year 1900 there were still old people in Ireland who when told to say the Hail Marys for penance would ask, "Do we have to say the Holy Mary too?" And there is an amusing example of persistence in peasant tradition of an even shorter **Ave** in the Fatima story. Before the angel appeared to them and made them change their ways, the children used to rush through their beads by saying only the words "Our Father" once and "Hail Mary" ten times for each decade.

Their simple recitation of the greeting was not too far off the original purpose of the prayer. It was, as its name denoted, a salutation. The faithful placed themselves before the Mother of God, like subjects before their sovereign, made their obeisance, and greeted her by titles of honor. Their repetition of the salutation, and of the obeisance, was a natural form of tribute similar to the multiple bows and curtsies made in approaching a secular monarch or the reiterated explosions of a twenty-one gun salute.

The long insistence on what is now the first part of the Hail Mary is perhaps indicative of what a Benedictine writer, Dom Jean Leclercq, calls the "disinterestedness" of medieval devotion to Mary. He notes that the writers of the time spoke much more of Mary than of themselves. That they devoted their sermons and their homilies principally to holding Mary up for our admiration, singing her praises, and leading us to rejoice in the consideration of her glories. In these, as in their hymns and prayers, it was only at the end and timidly that they introduced a moral exhortation to imitate Mary or to pray to her for favors. He attributes this attitude to the influence of the liturgy on their devotions.

Father Thurston makes a similar observation in accounting for the desire of the people to draw close to the Divine Office. He remarks

THE HAIL MARY

that the psalms seem to have been regarded as constituting the whole staple prayer of the Church and that people went to them that way. They did not pick out this or that psalm because it suited their mood. "They looked upon prayer not subjectively but objectively. They chanted the psalms not because they liked to say them, but because they thought that God liked to hear them, and had put them there to be said."

THE DISINTERESTED PRAISE OF THE OLD HAIL MARY actually drew fire from the Reformers. They complained that it wasn't a prayer at all, but merely a greeting. But before their time private devotion had already begun to add some form of petition, in many cases approaching closely the words that were eventually adopted. These are particularly evident in metrical paraphrases of the Hail Mary which began to appear. One of these, falsely attributed to Dante but certainly belonging to the early part of the fourteenth century, ends as follows.

O Virgin blessed, do thou always
Pray for us to God that He may pardon
And give us grace so to love that He
Will grant paradise at our death.

With the introduction of the Angelus we find inscriptions on bells, often called "Ave Maria bells," another source of information on the common form of the Hail Mary in this transition period. Some of these bore a formula, sometimes referred to as "the prayer of Alexander VI," which came very close to our own Hail Mary.

From the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries we have a number of examples of the Hail Mary in various languages. These examples show an increasing tendency to add some form of petition to the salutation. Most frequently this would take the form of an appeal for sinners and for help at the moment of death. But there was nothing fixed or generally accepted either about the words or about the addition of a concluding phrase to the salutation. As far as the Church was concerned, the **Ave Maria** ended with the words **Jesus. Amen.** The rest was a matter of individual initiative or local custom.

The situation gets clear expression in the **Myroure of Our Lady** written for the Brigettine nuns of Sion: "Some say at the begynnyng of this salutacyon Ave benigne Jesu and some saye after 'Maria mater dei' with other addycyons at the ende also. And such thinges

may be saide when folke saye their Aves of theyr own devocyon. But in the servyce of the chyrche, I trowe it to be moste sewer and moste medeful to obey he common use of saying, as he chyrche hath set, without all such addycyons."

The "addycyons" this writer had in mind might have included certain little clauses or **clausulae** whose origin is attributed to the Carthusians. Although these belong rather to the development of the mysteries of the rosary, their incorporation in the Hail Mary was common enough and lasted sufficiently long to merit their mention here.

IN THE EARLY PART OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY, the Carthusian Dominic Prutenus (The Prussian) introduced between the Holy Name (**Jesus Christ** was the form he used) and **Amen** a relative clause relating some incident in the life of Christ to the Blessed Virgin. The clause was different for each of the Hail Marys in this Carthusian five-decade "rosary". Four examples of the fifty clauses Dominic drew up in noteworthy conformity with the fifteen mysteries of today will demonstrate a form in which the Hail Mary was recited by many people for a long time.

At the fifth Hail Mary: ". . . Jesus Christ, whom thou didst wrap in swaddling clothes and lay in a manger. Amen."

Eighteenth: ". . . whose feet Mary Magdalen washed with her tears, wiped with her hair, kissed and anointed. Amen."

Thirty-second: ". . . who prayed for His executioners, saying 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do!' Amen."

Forty-eighth: ". . . who at last assumed thee, His Blessed Mother, to Himself, placed thee at His right and gloriously crowned thee. Amen."

As we come to the end of the fifteenth century and into the age of printing and the age of exploration, we find that "the common use of saying" the Hail Mary has brought it constantly closer to what in another sixty years will be the form "the chyrche hath set." Two examples are found in books which appeared around 1495. An English translation of the **Calendar of Shepherds** has the prayer ending this way: "Holy Mary moder of God praye for synners. Amen." And in Italy a work of Savonarola's is headed by a Hail Mary which is just one word away from our own. It ends, "Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of death. Amen."

THE HAIL MARY

The missing word "our" comes to complete the modern Hail Mary in a breviary printed for the Camaldolese monks. From extant evidence it looks as if Italy has the major credit in shaping the second half of the Hail Mary.

ALTHOUGH VARIOUS FORMS CONTINUED TO BE USED in the first half of the sixteenth century, the official "Catechism of the Council of Trent" puts its stamp of approval on the second half of the prayer we know. It gives the wording, "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death," and adds the comment: "Most rightly has the Holy Church added to this thanksgiving petition also and the invocation of the most holy Mother of God, thereby implying that we should piously and suppliantly have recourse to her in order that by her intercession she may reconcile God with us sinners and obtain for us the blessing we need both for this present life and for the life which has no end."

The strictly official adoption of the Hail Mary in its present form came with its publication in the Roman Breviary in 1568. Variations gradually died out and all Christians eventually came to say the same Hail Mary.

Tradition and local custom kept the older forms lingering on in some observance in some places. Dominican tradition, for example, still preserves a custom of saying the Hail Mary in its short form as an antiphon on one of the three small beads before beginning the rosary proper.

It is interesting to notice that while this manuscript was in preparation the Sacred Penitentiary announced in June, 1953, a new indulgence of 500 days, obtainable once daily, to those who devoutly kiss their rosary beads (properly blessed) and recite the first part of the Hail Mary up to the word Jesus."* A new honor for the old form of a favorite prayer.

*Noted in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, May 25-30, 1953, p. 311.

(From **THE STORY OF THE ROSARY** by James G. Shaw, copyright 1954 by The Bruce Publishing Company, Milwaukee, \$3.25.)

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